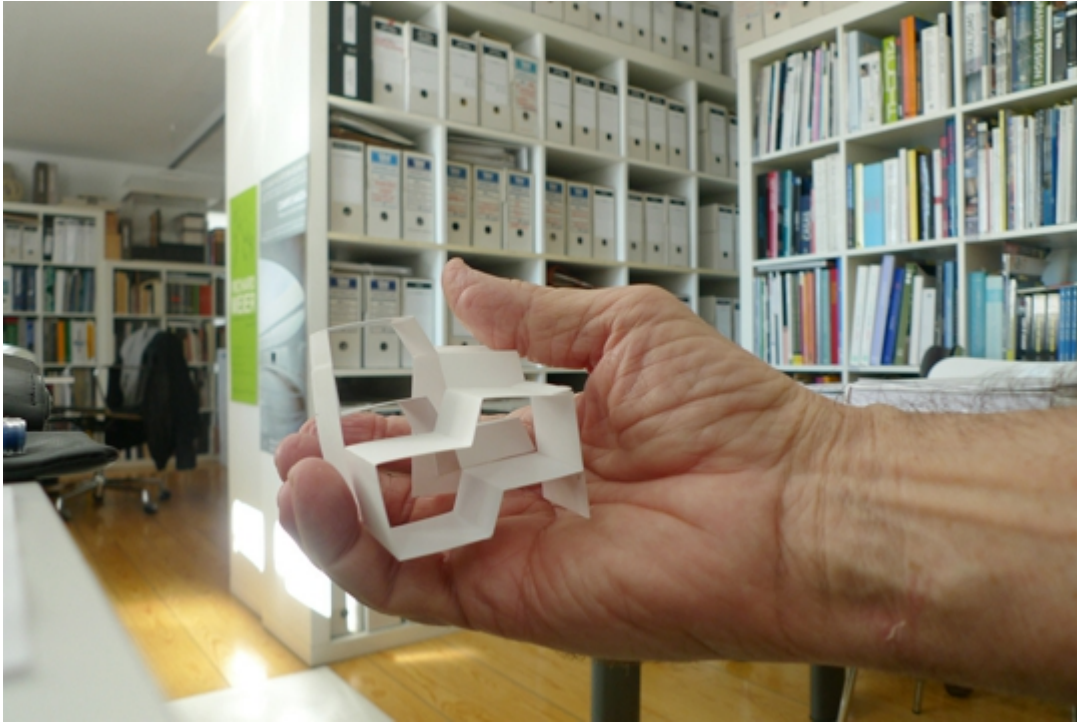


An Idea Fits in The Palm of a Hand



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An essay by Alberto Campo Baeza

Jewish laws prescribed that when a first-born son was presented in the temple shortly after birth, the offering consisted of two turtle doves or pigeons. And if the family were very poor, a handful of wheat would suffice: the wheat that would fit in the palm of one's hand.

That wonderful Jewish custom, which I learnt about when writing this text, moved me deeply on account of what it shares with my proposal of making models capable of fitting into the palm of one's hand.

One of my young professors, José Jaráiz, recently awarded a PhD following the presentation of his brilliant doctoral dissertation, acted as my assistant in the Masters Course I gave at the MPAA in 2011. And for the essay I had requested for the year-book the Faculty produces, the topic he chose was the Platonic allegory of the 'second navigation'. In the *Phaedo* Plato refers to how in the first navigation the boat is pushed onwards by the wind, while in the second there is no wind and it is the force of the oars in the hands of the crew that drives the boat forward.

The second navigation Jaráiz that refers to, as I do today, is the exercise that I first put to my students: that of constructing a model so small that it fits into the palm of a hand. A materialized idea should be able to fit into the plan of a hand. Because an idea has no size, so it fits in the palm of a hand.

Achieving this meant that the model had to be done in a size and scale that demanded the elimination of everything superfluous, synthesizing to the maximum the idea generated by the chosen project; rather like materializing the architectural idea in its purest state.

Over and over again I have recited to my students William Blake's poem in which, in order to express what we should dream, he tells us: *To see a world in a grain of sand*, to which he immediately adds: *hold infinity in the palm of your hand*. In the same vein, that very idea of holding something -in this case, architectural form- in the palm of one's hand, was my intention with this exercise.

I never tire of repeating that in Architecture, as in any creative work, it is indispensable to have a clear and definite idea of what one wants to do: 'Architectura sine idea vana architectura est'.

The more than positive experience of my strategy on that Masters Course prompted me to again request these little models from my regular students for the current Academic year 2012-2013; right at the outset, as they embarked on their own projects, when they were still germinating ideas. And once again the strategy proved to be extraordinarily worthwhile. I must also confess that it is something I have been doing with my own projects for some time, and what I have done with my latest project.

But, what is the purpose of such a reduced model? Indeed what is the purpose of making a model at all at a time when computers can generate 3D virtual models that can move in all directions? Well, although this is true, what is also true is that one can never achieve on the flat screen what only can be produced with a real model: the simultaneity of understanding three-dimensional space and its relationship with man and light. And the understanding of its relationship with sunlight, when the model is placed under the real sun, is something ineffable and infallible. I have never seen anyone placing their computer screen in the sunlight to see what happens. Because nothing would happen. And furthermore, if this scale-model is small, very small, devoid of any unnecessary additions, it must be capable of representing the idea which one wants to develop in the project with maximum precision. That is the ultimate goal of the exercise.

So the approach with these little scale-models is not the same as someone making a miniature. Far from it: what I am looking for here is the precision of the idea through form.

That little scale model, that idea in the palm of a hand, prompts serious reflection on the project itself, the kind of reflection that is characterized by research and at times can prove difficult for non-architects to understand. That tiny model is an extremely efficient tool of project research.

The models made by some architects on that MPAA course were quite outstanding: the model of Adalberto Libera's Villa Malaparte in Capri by the Chinese architect Jihanghoun Zhou and that of Alvar Aalto's Muratsalo experimental house by another Chinese architect, Hao Chen, were magnificent. The model done by Pablo Ramos Alderete and that of the Fosse Ardeatine Monument by the Italian architects Mario Fiorentino, Cacaprina, Cardelli y Aprile, done by Eduardo Blanes were also splendid. And the model of Louis Kahn's Kimbell Museum by Diego Franco Coto or the Pantheon as concavity by Serafina Amoroso, were equally worth mentioning. These students, all of them architects, had perfectly captured the spirit of the exercise in demonstrating that an idea can fit in the palm of a hand.

Neither may I say have the models prepared by my current-year students at the beginning of 2013 lagged behind. The little models made by Ara González and Jaime Jiménez Barragán, and by many other students, have expressed with precision what they have later developed on a larger scale.

There is nothing more satisfying for an educator than to verify the validity of new teaching strategies applied over time with the hand of experience. And in this particular instance it is that same hand that makes it possible to capture ideas, ideas materialized in small models. Because for a true architect, an idea fits in the palm of hand.

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